

Deflationary Logic

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RESPONSE

Deflationary Logic

Response to Sara Ahmed's 'Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the "New Materialism"'

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In 'Imaginary Prohibitions', Sara Ahmed seeks to understand the founding gestures of new materialism. One of the reasons why is that she is frustrated with common, yet reductive, readings of past feminist academic production. Another reason is care for the feminist legacy and for the current state of affairs and future for feminist theory and movement. Ahmed analyses the effects of the founding gestures of the burgeoning and emergent field called 'new materialism'. She argues that these gestures seem to have become routine in current-day feminist theory; they constitute not only new materialism but also 'a false and reductive history of feminist engagement with biology, science and materialism' (Ahmed, 2008: 24). The definitive statement of Ahmed's argument is that a *reductive* reading of matter and materiality constitutes a *new* materialism and vice versa. This makes clear that she is most sceptical of new materialism's innovative character. In other words, she claims that the production or founding of the 'new' field is predicated on destroying the complexity of the past work of feminist biologists and on sidelining the contemporary work of feminist science studies scholars. She claims that present-day science studies are not seen as part of feminist *theory*. Ahmed claims that the founding gesture can be characterized as an 'inflationary logic' (Ahmed, 2008: 31): the entire archive of past and present feminist scholarly production is being characterized as pro-culture, social-constructivist and

anti-biology, thus creating the need for a pro-nature, materialist, and pro-biology approach (i.e. new materialism). I want to argue here that the logic structuring Ahmed's analysis is *deflationary*: according to Ahmed it is *only* in feminist science studies that one finds a less binaristic approach of matter and culture and a less reductive reading of the feminist biologies of the past. Deflationary logic not only serves to legitimize feminist science studies but also underlies a particular reading of new materialism and its genealogy. Caring for feminism's past, present and future *and* for new materialism, I want to argue that feminist science studies, in Ahmed's text, becomes a neo-discipline. As such, new materialism is defined in an unnecessarily narrow manner.

Let me review Ahmed's argument. Ahmed is discontented with readings of second-wave feminist work as anti-biological. In other words:

... such a caricature of the second-wave feminist prevents us from engaging more closely (and perhaps generously) with the work of second-wave feminists. (Ahmed, 2008: 28)

I could not agree more with the politics of feminist generation laid out here. The effect of ascribing an anti-biological stance to second-wave feminists is analogous with readings of second-wave feminism as simply essentialist or universalist. A stance Ahmed explains as anti-biological deterministic instead (Ahmed, 2008: 28). However, if one goes back to second-wave sources, you will find their arguments to be much more complex. The post-feminist move to discard second-wave feminisms may be described as a narcissistic move (i.e. a celebration of the – post-feminist – present). In my work on new materialism, I argue against narcissism and nostalgia. The nostalgic move of celebrating the feminist past has the same effect as the narcissistic one: in both cases, there is no room for feminism in the present. Post-feminism constitutes a present in which feminism is *passé*. The celebration of past feminism equally isolates feminism in the past and cuts off feminism from the present. Ahmed's text features a touch of nostalgia as it celebrates 'some of the feminist work on biology written in the 1970s and 1980s' in which 'many feminist writers very carefully differentiate their object of critique from "biology as such", whatever "biology as such" might or could mean' (Ahmed, 2008: 28) and 'return[s] to Haraway's monumental book *Primate Visions*, published in 1989', in which 'we can see the force of this commitment to thinking of the traffic between nature and culture' (Ahmed, 2008: 35). I agree with the need to constantly reread and discuss past feminist scholarship because this instantiates the continuity of feminism's internal critique (Ahmed, 2008: 30). I agree that books such as *Primate Visions* are monumental, but I disagree with the localization of feminist approaches to the material-semiotic (Donna Haraway's term cited by Ahmed, 2008: 34) in only second-wave

feminist sources. Ahmed refers to feminist biologies of the present (Ahmed, 2008: 27, 35, 37 n. 2), but it is only past feminism/feminist theory that she *works with*. Working in a nostalgic vein, Ahmed has produced a text structured according to the inversion of the inflationary structure that she ascribes to new materialists. She performs a non-reductive reading of feminist biologies of the past and ascribes her reading to feminist science studies in general. Since she does not work with contemporary feminist science studies products she does not address feminism in the present (deflationary logic).

One of the effects of Ahmed's deflationary logic is the neo-disciplinization of feminist science studies. Again, I agree that the work produced under the rubric of feminist science studies is thrilling. I, too, subscribe to the argument that feminist science studies work is an intrinsic part of feminist theory; not all work coming out of feminist science studies is purely descriptive, social-science based and anti-theoretical. I take issue with the singling out of a particular kind of feminist science studies as the sole inheritor of second-wave feminist work on nature, (bodily) materiality and biology. Ahmed claims that it is not only feminist textual production of the second wave that is constituted as anti-biological:

... 'theory' is being constituted as anti-biological by removing from the category of 'theory' work that engages with the biological, including work within science and technology studies, which has a long genealogy, especially within feminism. Such work disappears in the very argument that we must return to the biological. (Ahmed, 2008: 26)

Ahmed argues that feminism and theory are constituted as diametrical opposites of biology. This argument does not allow for articulations of feminist science studies in current-day feminist theory, and results in a need for new materialism. Ahmed pays considerable attention to the work of Karen Barad. She introduces her as 'an important commentator within [new materialism]' (Ahmed, 2008: 34). Barad's work is used because it is said to illustrate the inflationary logic that constitutes new materialism. In Ahmed's text, Barad is *not* identified as a feminist science studies scholar. This is an important notation, because we see that a schism between new materialism and feminist science studies shapes up. While it is hard to deny that Barad is a feminist science studies scholar equal to Haraway *cum sui*, Barad is a physicist by training working in feminist studies and the inventor of 'agential realism'. Barad's inflationary logic, Ahmed says, is illustrated by claiming that the entire academic realm is characterized by 'the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn' (Barad, 2003, cited in Ahmed, 2008: 34). Therefore, a new materialism is legitimized; and this is the outcome:

... the very claim that matter is missing can actually work to reify matter as if it could be an object that is absent or present. By turning matter into an object or theoretical category, in this way, the new materialism reintroduces the binarism between materiality and culture that much work in science studies has helped to challenge. Matter becomes a fetish object: as if it can be an 'it' that we can be for or against. (Ahmed, 2008: 35)

This fragment is exemplary as a representation of the special attention Ahmed pays to feminist science studies throughout the article. By celebrating the field's ancestor (feminist biologies) for erasing 'proper objects, including disciplinary objects' (Ahmed, 2008: 35), feminist science studies becomes an unnecessarily narrow field, a neo-discipline.¹ Here, feminist science studies are singled out as a scholarly field constituted by feminist biologists, even though they entail much more than that. Nina Lykke (2002: 140) has defined the field in the following way:

Among other things, Feminist Science Studies introduced a consequent gender perspective in constructivist technoscience studies and put focus on the embodiment and sociocultural situatedness of the scientist.

The feminist science studies legitimized by Ahmed entails a *reductive* characterization of the field (feminist science studies equals feminist studies of biology). Ironically, reductionism is, however, precisely what she seeks to avoid (cf., for example, Ahmed, 2000: 79; 2004: 200).

I have explained in what manner Ahmed's logic is deflationary. My argument is based on her reading of feminist science studies as *the* field inheriting complex feminist biologies, and making non-reductive readings of this inheritance. She constitutes a biologically tainted feminist science studies. Now, I want to present my own reading of the genesis of new materialism. I have taken up the category of new or neo-materialism to further the project of what I call second-wave feminist epistemology. I define second-wave feminist epistemology as an epistemology that is structured by a dialectical response to the epistemological mainstream (a feminist epistemology dualistically opposes an epistemology 'proper' thus constituting not only a feminist epistemic realm but also an epistemology proper) and according to dialectically relating feminist epistemic schools of thought (Sandra Harding's feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist postmodernism). I have taken this project on for two reasons. First, I wanted to think through the claim that 'feminist philosophy has moved beyond the premises that mark its beginnings' (Braidotti, 2003: 195–6). Second, I wanted to pick up a politics of feminist generation that I have found inspirational in the work of Ahmed (see earlier, and Ahmed, 2003). By taking on this project I have strategically positioned new materialism as the inheritor of feminist standpoint theory, and as such, as an epistemic strand that engages with historical materialism (cf. Ahmed, 2008: 32) but not solely so. After studying the

ways that new materialism *repositions* second-wave feminist epistemology in general and feminist standpoint theory (a materialism!) in particular, I have come to argue that new materialists claim that a fruitful feminist positioning entails a focus on the material-semiotic (neither solely nature nor solely culture). I position the focus on the material-semiotic not only in past feminism (Ahmed's new materialism as a good-old feminist biology) nor just in contemporary feminism (new feminist materialism as a post-feminism). I have used a cartographical methodology that is a way to avoid a dialecticist feminist epistemic realm. This methodology does not reconfirm narcissism or nostalgia either. Furthermore, I have discovered that new materialism entails an affirmation of truth that is different than a mirror of nature or of culture. Instead, truth is seen as onto-epistemological (Barad!). Alternatively, new materialism does not merely affirm the biological or the cultural body, but rather confirms that bodies are constituted in (affective) encounters (Ahmed!). It goes beyond both 'pure' materiality and 'just' representation, affirming the matter-representation divide (Claire Colebrook) and allowing the constitution of a *transdisciplinary* perspective (drawing upon feminist science studies, feminist postcolonial studies, Deleuzian feminism) that is both a new feminist materialism and a critical and creative engagement with second-wave feminist epistemologies. I call this new materialism a *third-wave* materialism. I have chosen to do so, not because I want to set up another (feminist) progress narrative, but rather to signify the non-dualistically organized epistemic realm to which Rosi Braidotti has alluded. This is the feminist epistemic realm where we do not find the constitution of a (historical) materialism 'proper' or the uncritical celebration of feminist standpoint theory, nor do we find feminist biologies of the past. What we find here is feminist generation.

NOTE

1. Neo-discipline signifies 'interdisciplinary subjects, successfully disciplined and recognized as autonomous, such as gender studies in some national contexts, for instance. These are subjects that cross traditional disciplinary borders but have a coherent body of knowledge not belonging to any other discipline' (Holm and Liinason, 2005: 5 n. 17).

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